

Squeaky Wheel Celebrates Ten Years in Buffalo
Gabe Rhodes, *Main*, November/December 1996

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Squeaky Wheel/Media Resources Buffalo was founded in 1986 when the renowned Media Study Buffalo closed its doors. A small but tightly knit group of artists realized that the closing would deprive them and the city’s cultural landscape of a valuable resource. They felt the crunch of dwindling grants and knew that a new independent media arts resource center would be difficult to fund. Now Squeaky Wheel is celebrating their tenth anniversary with a citywide exhibition of Buffalo’s media artists and their work. They have established themselves with the local arts community, they have generated a 300 strong membership, they have provided a sanctuary for Buffalo youth, and they have done it all without ever receiving funding from the NEA. We were curious about what kind of planning and thinking led Squeaky Wheel to thrive to such a degree.

Cheryl Jackson, Executive Director, can pinpoint three integral factors in their development. “I always like to credit NYSCA for their support and financial contributions,” she says. Over the years the NYSCA has provided Squeaky Wheel with instrumental equipment grants. With this seed money the non-profit has been able to purchase video editing equipment which has provided revenue through rentals; and Macintosh computers, which they have used for media training workshops.

“I also like to credit Hallwalls for their moral and practical support,” says Jackson. Hallwalls is a contemporary arts center, formed 21 years ago in an attempt to attract New York City artists to Buffalo. Hallwalls has a much larger budget and more resources available, so it serves as a model for success to the folks at Squeaky Wheel. The two non-profits share resources and information while keeping in close contact with each other so there isn’t conflict, duplication or competition in program areas.

“Mainly,” she concludes, “I think, it’s our location in Buffalo. Because of its history as a large, important, and wealthy industrial city, its citizens have always supported their cultural institutions and have been extremely proud of them. Undoubtedly, though, as everywhere else, educating the public about the arts is a never ending process.

Education is one of Squeaky Wheel’s key agendas. For example, the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo recently put together a large touring exhibition called “Being and Time: The Emergence of Video Projection.” Squeaky Wheel is teaching a workshop for high school students in conjunction with the museum’s exhibition so that its influence will be understood across a broader age group

They are also gearing up for and beginning to publicize their 10th anniversary programs, which will include screenings, installations, live public access shows, lectures, and panels happening at locations throughout the city in the spring of 1997. “We need our future citizens and leaders to

have a solid knowledge of and appreciation for the arts, as well as an understanding of why they're vital in our lives. More art-in-education programs, more resource sharing between schools, art organizations, and social service agencies."

However, marketplace competition is challenging the small media space and its tenacious success. Jackson is finding that the University of Buffalo and the Rochester Institute of Technology are aggressively competing with Squeaky Wheel by forming summer and adult classes in filmmaking, video, and multimedia; while also holding free weekly and monthly screenings. In her eyes, these institutions took note of the niche that Squeaky Wheel had created and saw a new revenue-generating source. Unfortunately, it is impossible for Squeaky Wheel to compete with their advertising or equipment budgets. "The colleges and universities are always publicly proclaiming about how much they help and support a town or city, and they generally do," says Jackson. "Just not in this particular situation."

But underlying Squeaky Wheel's success is the enormous sense of pride, community, and artistic merit that characterizes the Buffalo arts scene. Jackson has watched community support for independent media organizations grow over the past ten years and she wonders if, as this interest grows within the community grows even more, it will ensure the continued success of organizations like Squeaky Wheel. But also, as competition grows in the field and the larger and stronger institutions such as local universities see media education as lucrative, how can the small media center market its services to the public at large while remaining true to its mission?

Jackson says that their focus must remain oriented to the grass-roots if the organization is to survive and grow. After ten years, art patrons in Buffalo are recognizing the importance of an institution like Squeaky Wheel, and it is gaining a stronger reputation among funders. Jackson hopes to use the increased visibility and funds to attract more young people to use the center. "The kids here are graduating from high school and they don't have anything to do. They don't have any money. We don't need to start something new for them because our center, as a media education resource, already exists."

"But primarily, I think we have to be devoted firmly to the artists and their work. The work artists do is a vital aspect of any culture or community and this is as true for the media arts as any other discipline. Issues of access and education are still very important, but now I feel that the focus needs to swing back to what the artists need and will need to work in the future. That means broader regranting and residency programs. It means broader and more workable distribution systems. The purpose and goal is to continue to fund and support creative, non-commercial art works, be they film, video, digital, multimedia, or whatever new forms the future brings."

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